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GEORGE HERBERT

Wise and simple-hearted King Alfred once said that we all love the reputation of being Christians, but do not love the necessary deeds. Men prate much of the Golden Rule, but prefer to use the iron one. There once lived in Cavalier days a saintly poet who prated little and practised much, and who daily bore his cross of sacrifice with a meekness that turned scoffers into worshippers. His name was George Herbert. That man's life, says Hutton, "was itself the noblest of his poems, and while it had the beauty of his verses, it had their quaintness as well."¹

Go look at the face of this pious singer with its strange mingling of strength and weakness, manliness and effeminacy, triumph and anguish:—that long but not unhandsome countenance, the steeple forehead, a nose and a chin with a slight hint of puritanical sharpness about them, a dainty wee bit of mustache, a fine, eager, gentle mouth, a pair of steady, thoughtful eyes, with deepening lines between them and about the nostrils. Here is an intense soul that has suffered,—ah, suffered vastly. Many have remarked on that countenance. "His face is the face of a spirit dimly bright," writes Mrs. Browning,² while Alexander Grosart — zealous scholar and keen observer — notes the "thought-lined, burdened-eyed, translucent as if transfigured face." "There is a noble 'ivory palace' for the meek and holy soul there; brow steep rather than wide; lips tremulous as with music; nose pronounced as Richard Baxter's; cheeks worn and thin; hair full and flowing as in younger days: altogether a face which one could scarcely pass without note — all the more that there are lines in it which inevitably suggest that if George Herbert mellowed into the sweet lovingness and gentleness of John 'whom Jesus loved,' it was of grace and through masterdom of a naturally lofty, fiery spirit."³ And

¹ *Social England*, Vol. IV, p. 34.

² *The Book of the Poets*, Vol. II, p. 5.

³ *Leisure Hours*, Vol. XXII, p. 455.

quaint old Izaak Walton, who walked among men with a shrewd but ever kindly disposed soul, looked upon him with love and wrote: "His aspect was cheerful, and his speech and motion did both declare him a gentleman; for they were all so meek and obliging that they purchased love and respect from all that knew him."⁴ And listen: "Some of the meaner sort of his parish did so love and reverence Mr. Herbert that they would let their plough rest when Mr. Herbert's Saint's bell rung to prayers; that they might also offer their devotions to God with him; and would then return back to their plough. And his most holy life was such that it begot such reverence to God and to him that they thought themselves the happier when they carried Mr. Herbert's blessing back with them to their labour. Thus powerful was his reason and example to persuade others to a practical piety and devotion."⁵

What an opportunity for an artist!—the plowmen bowing in the lonely field while within the distant church the beloved priest calls upon their common God. Such a man, then, was the author of *The Temple*. In that short life of forty years there was a soul-battle full of merciless anguish,—a soul-battle waged from the gaudiest temple of world-pride to the white steps of Heaven itself.

In the proud days before Cromwell there stood near Montgomery, Wales, an ancient castle where many a gay and brilliant courtier had lived and loved and reveled and gone forth to battle for his king. That home no longer stands; for the stormy days of the Commonwealth saw it fall into ruin. But here in the old days the Herberts had dwelt, and had pointed with pride to the long line of knights that led back to the brave Earl of Pembroke in the days of King Edward IV. Here the poet, George Herbert, was born in 1539, a younger son in a family of ten children. The old-fashioned family grew to a most estimable manhood and womanhood, and one son besides George brought fresh fame to the name—the talented and somewhat erratic Lord Herbert of Cherbury. The father died when the

⁴ *Life of George Herbert.*

⁵ Walton: *Life of George Herbert.*

future poet was a child of four, and left the little ones to the care of their beautiful, brilliant, lovable, but undoubtedly imperious mother. In admiration of her intellectual strength, Dr. Donne, founder of the metaphysical school, wrote:

In all her words to every hearer fit,
You may at revels or at council sit.

She it was who first directed his mind toward that intense regard for religion which, increasing with the years, at length changed his soul into a living sacrifice for things divine.

Under her guidance he laid the foundation of his thorough education and entered Westminster School exceptionally well prepared. It has been said that pride of family made him somewhat reserved toward the other boys there; but hear once more the words of quiet-voiced Walton: "The beauties of his pretty behaviour and wit shined and became so eminent and lovely in this his innocent age that he seemed to be marked out for piety and to become the care of Heaven and of a particular good angel to guard and guide him."⁶ He entered Trinity in 1609, was a B.A. in 1611, was elected a fellow of Trinity in 1614, and received his M.A. in 1615. His career as a University man was nothing short of brilliant. He was chosen Public Orator of the University in 1619 and held the position for eight years. He counted among his intimate friends such men as Sir Henry Wotton, the Duke of Richmond, the Marquis of Hamilton, and the famous Dr. Donne. Even Lord Bacon had this youth look over his philosophical works, and meekly indeed the great philosopher received the young man's criticisms. One day the ambitious Orator wrote a Latin letter to the king, thanking him for a book, and so exquisitely formed was the Latin that the ruler declared him the jewel of the University. Excellent student that he was, however, he was still a gay and worldly fellow. He seldom attended to the duties of his oratorship unless the king himself was to be present; but on such occasions he delivered addresses so brilliant and so handsomely phrased that his royal audience went away enthusiastic. And his reward was not slow to follow: we find the sovereign giving

⁶ *Life of George Herbert.*

him an office which required not one whit of labor save drawing one hundred and twenty pounds a year. With this money, writes Walton, "and his annuity and the advantages of his college and of his oratorship, he enjoyed his genteel humour for clothes and court-like company, and seldom looked toward Cambridge" Thus, at twenty-six, his pathway through life seemed assured of smoothness, pleasure, and idleness.

At length, however, there came into his life, as into every man's, a crisis, a turning point, where his decision meant either success or destruction. For several years Herbert had been hoping, and with good reason, for high office in the government service. His influential friends and the king's outspoken admiration entirely warranted such expectation. But King James passed away, and so did other friends, and Herbert, hopeless of advancement in secular office, turned to that institution for which he was so admirably fitted — the Church. The unfeigned devoutness of the man was remarkable. Searching among his effects after his death, his friends came across an engraved figure of the Christ crucified on an anchor — the image a parting gift of Dr. Donne's — and upon it the saintly Herbert had written:

When my dear friend could write no more,
He gave this seal and so gave o'er.

When winds and waves rise highest, I am sure
This anchor keeps my faith, that me, secure.

For a little time before entering his new sphere of life he lived in almost complete solitude at a friend's house in Kent. He feared to undertake the work of priest; strange to say, he did not consider himself good enough! In July, 1626, he was given as his charge Leyton Ecclesia, a village in Huntingdon, and what a charge it was! The church was so tumbled down that it had not been used for twenty years; there was no house for the clergyman; and the people had seemingly lost all ambition in the way of worship. Undismayed, however, the inexperienced Herbert entered the field, begged contributions from relations and friends far and wide, and soon built one of

¹ *Life of George Herbert.*

the most artistic small churches in all England. Still he hesitated to become a regularly ordained minister of the Church of England. The constant question before him seems to have been: "Will my soul stand the test?" But zealous Nicholas Ferrar and that mighty worker, Laud, were numbered among his friends, and they so placed the matter before him that he was induced to take holy orders in 1630. He seemed to be blindly following what he considered God's will; for hear what he wrote in *Affliction* soon after becoming a rector:

Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me
None of my books will show;
I read, and sigh, and wish I were a tree;
For then sure should I grow
To fruit or shade; at least some bird would trust
Her household to me, and I should be just.

A miserably poor comparison, perhaps; but it shows, at least, the utter trustfulness and real desire of the man.

The remainder of Herbert's life was to be spent at Bemerton in Wiltshire. Like most sensible men, he very soon reached the conclusion that life as a bachelor was not the ideal state of man, and he married his wife the third day after meeting her. This was indeed short work; but Izaak Walton declares that the girl's father had so praised the gentle poet and preacher that she was in love with him before they ever met. And listen to the quaint old fisher's account of their honeymoon experience: "The third day after he was made rector of Bemerton and had changed his sword and silk clothes into a canonical habit, he returned so habited . . . to Bemerton; and immediately after he had seen and saluted his wife, he said to her: 'You are now a minister's wife, and must now so far forget your father's house as not to claim a precedence of any of your parishoners; for you are to know that a priest's wife can challenge no precedence or place but that which she purchases by her obliging humility; and I am sure places so purchased do best become them.'"⁸ And Walton says the bride cheerfully acquiesced, and from that day was almost as noted for her meekness, constant sacrifice, and charities as was her husband.

⁸ *Life of George Herbert.*

There is a modern evangelist who holds that the clergyman of to-day is preaching the Reverend John Smith and him dignified instead of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Not so with George Herbert. His first sermon at Bemerton was a brilliant exposition, full of learning and ornament,—just to show them that he could,—but at the close of it he meekly announced to his hearers that “his language and his expressions should be more plain and practical in his future sermons,” as he did not wish to “fill their heads with unnecessary notion.”⁹ Then, too, look sometime through his little book, *The Country Parson*. He set himself to the task of making these rules not for the guidance of others but for himself; and yet, as Izaak Walton has said, the preacher “that can spare twelve pence and yet wants it [the book], is scarce excusable.”¹⁰

Life to such a man could not be a long day of luxurious ease; it meant an unceasing struggle with the powers of evil. But the good wife stood beside him, and then, too, he had his music for consolation. And how he loved music! He once exclaimed that it “raised his weary soul so far above the earth that it gave him an earnest of the joys of heaven before he possessed them.”¹¹ He was a capital hand at the lute, and was accustomed to set his own sacred verses to music and to sing them of evenings. The scene brings to mind another struggler, Martin Luther, who, in his hours of utter weariness and despair, turned to the viol and song for consolation, and came back to the world refreshed and brave.

George Herbert must have been indeed a lovable man. So many little acts of his life testify to that strange sincerity which made men wonder, admire, and love. When, according to the ancient custom, he entered alone into the church to pray and to toll the bell announcing a new rector, he stayed within so much longer than was expected that his friends, in alarm, crept to a window and looked in. And there, lying prostrate before the altar, he was found praying and vowing undying allegiance to the duties of his new office. Widely, too, the story was told of

⁹ Walton: *Life of George Herbert*.

¹⁰ Walton: *Life of George Herbert*.

¹¹ Walton: *Life of George Herbert*.

how an old woman, coming before him to speak of her sorrows, was so overcome by the majesty and nobleness of his face that she could not speak; how he took her by the hand, reassured her, and listened patiently; and how he sent her home with a cheerful heart, praising God and praying for the good pastor. Then, too, all the country round had heard that as he was walking to Salisbury to attend a meeting of his beloved music club, he met a poor fellow driving a worn-out nag staggering under its load, and that, throwing off his clergyman's coat, he helped unload the animal. When he appeared, sweaty and dirty, at the meeting of the club, what an answer was that which he gave to a disgusted member: "If I be bound to pray for all that be in distress, I am sure that I am bound to practise what I pray for." Again, as he went along that same ancient Salisbury road, he met a country gentleman, asked him about his faith, and so gently and so meekly advised him that the man fell in love with the unknown clergyman, and often went out of his way to meet the sweet-faced follower of Christ. He lived as he taught. Every morning and every evening he went with his little family into the church and read the service; a tenth part of his total income he gave to his wife to distribute to the poor; he lived to serve. After building his Bemerton home at his own expense and with much actual labor on his own part, he asked but one thing of all his successors, and this request he engraved on the fireplace:

TO MY SUCCESSOR

If thou chance to find
A new home to thy mind,
And built without thy cost;
Be good to the poor
As God gives thee store,
And then my labour's not lost.

Thus he went in and out among men — an ideal for all his humble parishoners.

But now came the last struggle. For some years he had been threatened with consumption, and in 1631 he began to show alarming signs of a decline. He labored on, however, hoping doubtless to forget his disease in his work, but at length became

too feeble to read the church service; and he knew that now at last Death stood beside him. Those last few days were full of pathetic incidents. Sunday before his death he rose suddenly from his couch, called for his music, and sang his own once well-known lyric:

The Sundays of man's life,
Threaded together on Time's string,
Make bracelets to adorn the wife
Of the eternal glorious King:
On Sundays heaven's door stands ope;
Blessings are plentiful and rife,
More plentiful than hope.

As the last hour approached, his friend, Mr. Duncan, visited him. The dying Herbert brought forth a manuscript volume of poems, handed it to the visitor, and "with a thoughtful and contented look," said to him: "Sir, I pray deliver this little book to my dear brother Ferrar, and tell him he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master; in whose service I have now found perfect freedom; desire him to read it; and then, if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not, let him burn it; for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies."¹² And thus he passed on, breathing the simple prayer, "Lord, now receive my soul." "He was buried (according to his own desire)," says John Aubrey, "with the singing service for the burial of dead by the singing men of Sarum." He sleeps at Bemerton, and as one walks out from Salisbury one may see among the trees in the distance the beautiful church erected to his memory.

His life has been compared to a day which he describes:

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridal of the earth and sky;

but if we would see in poetry the real story of his soul life, we must look into those quaint lines, *The Quip*. He had passed through the amorous temptation of the higher society-life of England, and he could write:

¹² Walton: *Life of George Herbert*.

First, Beauty crept into a rose,
Which when I pluckt not, 'Sir,' said she,
'Tell me, I pray, whose hands are those?'
But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.

Then, as a man acquainted with luxuries, as a man high in rank, as the friend of nobles and kings, undoubtedly he had visions of wealth.

Then Money came, and clinking still,
'What tune is this, poor man?' said he;
'I heard in music you had skill:'
But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me.

And beyond all else, he had longed for fame and praise.

Then came brave Glory, puffing by
In silks that whistled, who but he?
He scarce allowed me half an eye:
But thou shall answer, Lord, for me.

But all these had passed from him, and he asked but one boon: that God would recognize him as His own.

"Sir, I pray deliver this little book." The little book was the famous *Temple, or Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*, a quaint collection that has been bread and wine to many a weary and hungry soul. We of this age, somewhat indifferent as to modes and regularity of worship, find little of the food which other generations discovered; perhaps, however, that is our fault and not the book's. To us it is "a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore," and its expressions seem at times even grotesque. And true enough, its figures of speech and carefully involved phrases are indeed eccentric. But this trait has, perhaps, been over-emphasized. Gosse speaks of his "excessive pseudo-psychological ingenuity;" Whipple calls his verse a "bizarre expression;" and James Montgomery declares that it is "devotion turned into masquerade;" but a close study of his phrases will lead one to believe, with Craik, that the quaintness lies in his thoughts rather than in their expression, "which is in general sufficiently simple and luminous."¹³

It must be admitted, however, that there are too many riddles, too many oddities, too many fantastic fancies. Religion had

¹³ *Compendious History of English Literature*, Vol. II, p. 19.

become so familiar to him that he dallied and toyed with it.
Too often the page is blemished with such a conceit as

God gave thy soul brave wings ; put not those feathers
Into a bed to sleep out all ill weathers.

And yet it requires something of an inventive mind to create such webs of unsuspected relationships and comparisons. Certainly he was original; certainly he was imaginative; certainly in another day, through these gifts, he might have produced beautiful structures; but the style of his age turned his thoughts into the alien channel of the far-fetched and over- quaint, and his talents failed to bring forth their highest possibilities. His rhythms are often intricate, and even the very forms of some of his most heartfelt poems are fantastic. Note in *Easter Wings* how the verses fall into the outlines of wings, how the lines diminish as his pride diminishes, how they increase as his confidence in God increases:

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poor:

With thee
O let me rise,
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

The day demanded poetic wings and altars and crosses, and so did succeeding days until Dryden ridiculed the whole matter in *Mac Flecknoe*:

Choose for thy command
Some peaceful province in acrostic land,
Where thou may'st *wings* display or *altars* raise,
And torture one poor word ten thousand ways.

Think what we may about these eccentricities, we must see that Herbert long filled a need. Sincere man that he was, religious by nature, and born to be thoughtful, his simple-minded and single-minded devoutness encouraged and inspired many a flagging soul, and led men to believe, with Richard Baxter, that

"Heart-work and Heaven-work make up his books."¹⁴ To this day critics may come to scoff in Herbert's *Temple*; but they are more than likely to remain to pray. Many a reader would echo the sentiment of free-thinking Samuel Coleridge, who, writing in 1818, declared: "I find more substantial comfort now in pious George Herbert's *Temple*, which I used to read to amuse myself with his quaintness, in short, only to laugh at, than in all the poetry since the poems of Milton."¹⁵ Cowley, Quarles, Crashaw, and other religious song-writers of the era may have been more brilliant and far more accurate in thought and in composition; but here is an intense earnestness, a clutching at the things eternal, a desperate battling, which is alien to his fellow-singers. Read his *Lines on Man*, "one of the profoundest utterances of the Elizabethan age," according to Whipple.¹⁶ Note in *Frailty* the psalm-like vigor and directness when his soul rises to its full vision of the world's temptations:

But when I view abroad both regiments,
 The world's and thine,
 Thine clad with simpleness and sad events,
 The other fine,
 Full of glory and gay weeds,
 Brave language, braver deeds,
 That which was dust before doth quickly rise,
 And prick mine eyes.

O, brook not this, lest if what even now
 My foot did tread
 Affront those joys wherewith thou didst endow
 And long since wed
 My poor soul, even sick of love,—
 It may a Babel prove,
 Commodious to conquer heaven and thee,
 Planted in me.

Soul-earnestness goes a long way in art and will cover a multitude of technical sins. In spite of the confusion of comparisons, the illogical mingling of figures, these outpourings from the heart of Herbert tell, and tell effectively, of suffering and

¹⁴ *Poetical Fragments*.

¹⁵ *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare*.

¹⁶ *Literature of the Age of Elizabeth*, p. 248.

tears, and patient waiting: and be they artistic or crude, they flow on into the hearts of other men. Read the last lines of *Employment*, and confess that in their sad sincerity of mood, they must be classed among the beautiful prayers of man:

All things are busy; only I
Neither bring honey with the bees,
Nor flowers to make that, nor the husbandry
To water these.

I am no link of thy great chain,
But all my company is a weed.
Lord, place me in thy consort; give one strain
To my poor reed.

And yet, when we come to analyze these lines, we find a very "unrhetorical" confusion of idea, first a bee, second a flower, third a husbandman, fourth a chain, fifth a weed, sixth a musician. Rhetoricians will please take notice.

Perhaps the reason of Herbert's success lies in the fact that everyone loves to study the development of a human soul. Here in *The Temple*, we find just such an inspiring soul as all men, good or wicked, admire, a soul struggling to assert itself and to claim mastery over the temptations of a most tempting age. To such a spirit the warfare can never be mild. What a feverish anxiety is in his inward glance! What positive terror at times! The lyric confidence of that glad-hearted devotee, Crashaw, is impossible to him; he can but cry for mercy. His was a mind of naturally great possibilities, and, active enterprises for these being denied, that hungry mind began to feed upon itself. Therefore, in spite of the declaration that "as a manual of devotion it is as though a seraph covered his face with his wings in rapturous adoration,"¹⁷ in spite of Emerson's belief that "so much piety was never married to so much wit,"¹⁸ in spite of Ferrar's claim that there is "a picture of a divine soul in every page," these songs of Herbert's pain-wrung heart must be admitted coldly puritanical when compared with the rich, gorgeous, cathedral tone of Crashaw's chants. But here in Herbert is a psychological insight far beyond the scope of his lyrical con-

¹⁷ John Brown: *The Parson of Bemerton, Good Words*, Vol. 31, p. 697.

¹⁸ *Parnassus*, Preface.

temporary. Here is something Browning-like in the keen observation of critical moments in soul-growth. He had suffered as other men had suffered; he had felt the blush of humiliation and the pangs of remorse: and he could picture with appealing and effective realism the conflicts of spirit and earth. See in *The Collar* the sudden rush of temptation:

Have I no harvest but a thorn
 To let me blood, and not restore
 What I have lost with cordial fruit?
 Sure there was wine
 Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn
 Before my tears did drown it;
 Is the year only lost to me?
 Have I no bays to crown it,
 No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted,
 All wasted?
 Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,
 And thou hast hands.
 Recover all thy sigh-blown age
 On double pleasures; leave thy cold dispute
 Of what is fit and not; forsake thy cage,
 Thy rope of sands
 Which petty thoughts have made; and made to thee
 Good cable, to enforce and draw,
 And be thy law,
 While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.
 Away! Take heed:
 I will abroad!
 Call in thy death's-head there, tie up thy fears;
 He that forbears
 To suit and serve his need
 Deserves his load.

Thus comes that ancient whisper of evil: sweep away all restraints; let the wild fancies of your passions lead on into rapturous excess. But note the victory:

But as I rav'd, and grew more fierce and wild
 At every word,
 Methought I heard one calling, 'Child;'
 And I reply'd, 'My Lord.'

The best poetry of the man came in those two years of keenest anguish when he was hesitating between the world and the Church; and perhaps this is the reason that he betrays a con-

science morbid and almost diseased in its tenderness. His is a stern, Puritan view of the vanity of all earthly things:

Lord, in my silence how do I despise
 What upon trust
 Is styled honor, riches, or fair eyes,
 But is fair dust!

And yet he is not without tenderness. How many a heart his little poem, *Virtue*, has consoled:

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,
 Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye;
 Thy root is ever in its grave,
 And thou must die.

.
 Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
 Like seasoned timber, never gives;
 But though the whole world turn to coal,
 Then chiefly lives.

The volume is indeed "a book in which by declaring his own spiritual conflicts, he hath comforted and raised many a dejected and discomposed soul, and charmed them into sweet and quiet thoughts; a book, by the frequent reading whereof, and the assistance of that spirit that seemed to inspire the author, the reader may attain habits of Peace and Piety, and all the gifts of the Holy Ghost and Heaven; and may, by still reading, still keep those sacred fires burning upon the altar of so pure a heart, as shall free it from the anxieties of this world, and keep it fixed upon things that are above."¹⁹

Will this poet of prayers and tears and trust live? Probably his fame is secure. In its own day *The Temple* was in every cultured home. By 1674 twenty thousand copies had been sold, and Cowley was the only church poet who could rival him in popularity. Among the more strictly orthodox of modern English and American readers he undoubtedly holds his own; and that is saying much for a minor poet. And who can tell what change may come? At times there sweep over all nations mighty waves of religious enthusiasm, and at such times the half neglected thinkers and singers of past days are frequently

¹⁹ Walton: *Life of Dr. John Donne*.

brought forth to speak once more. Whether or not such fortune shall ever fall to this poet cannot be known; but this much is certain: "Myriads treasure in their heart of hearts the poems of George Herbert who know little and do not care to know more of the mighty sons of song." ²⁰

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²⁰ Grosart: *Leisure Hours*, Vol. 22, p. 325,